



# Policy Knowledge in the Public

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Michael J. Boskin and Douglas Rivers

*Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right . . . and a desire to know.*

—John Adams

A core finding of public opinion research is that most voters do not know much about the policy debates that occur among academic experts, Congress, and the bureaucracy and are covered in the press. Their knowledge is thin, often confused, and sometimes mistaken (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lupia 2015). To some extent, this is inevitable, because individual voters usually lack the incentives to acquire costly information about policy decisions over which they will have microscopic influence. This would be a dismal situation if voters *thought* they were well informed and were impervious to new information. But there is little research on which areas they feel uninformed about and desire to know more. Voters' policy information is admittedly imperfect, but is it susceptible to improvement?

This question is likely more urgent in an era of siloed information segmentation and media that rejects balance and alternative interpretations of data, often substituting opinion for objective fact. Further, social media incentivizes extreme statements because they are most likely to gather disproportionately more attention. To these matters, add the risks from the impending wide availability of generative artificial intelligence. As famed Princeton psychologist and Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman (2011, 62) notes, "A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth."

We have begun a new project to measure not just the preferences and beliefs that Americans have about a range of policies, but also how much Americans think they (and their fellow citizens) know about these policies, and whether they think they would benefit from acquiring more, and more accurate, information about such policies. Our goal is to identify areas of policymaking in which it is feasible to improve the public's understanding of the costs and benefits of alternative policy choices. We are conducting a series of polls that ask voters how much they know compared with others about the details of policies and how useful additional information would be to their making more informed choices.

The initial survey focused on what voters think about the federal budget and social insurance.<sup>1</sup> YouGov interviewed two thousand adult citizens for the project using its online panel. The sample was weighted to be representative of the US adult population in terms of age, race, gender, education, and 2020 presidential vote.

## WHAT VOTERS ACTUALLY KNOW

We asked the respondents in our sample a series of simple factual questions about the federal budget. The questions were not particularly difficult—one would hope that most citizens would know that in recent years the federal government has spent more than it has collected in taxes or that the national debt has been rising as a percentage of GDP. Yet only around half of all adults are able to give a correct answer to these questions. Fifty-seven percent of the sample knew that the federal debt had increased over the last five years as a percentage of GDP. Federal government outlays have exceeded revenues every year since 1999 and by large amounts, but only 47% of the sample were aware that the federal government is running a deficit.

In contrast, only about one-fifth of the sample gave a wrong answer (saying that federal spending or the deficit was about the same or had decreased), with the remaining 25%–29% admitting that they did not know. That is, the evidence points more toward a lack of information than to misinformation (table 1).

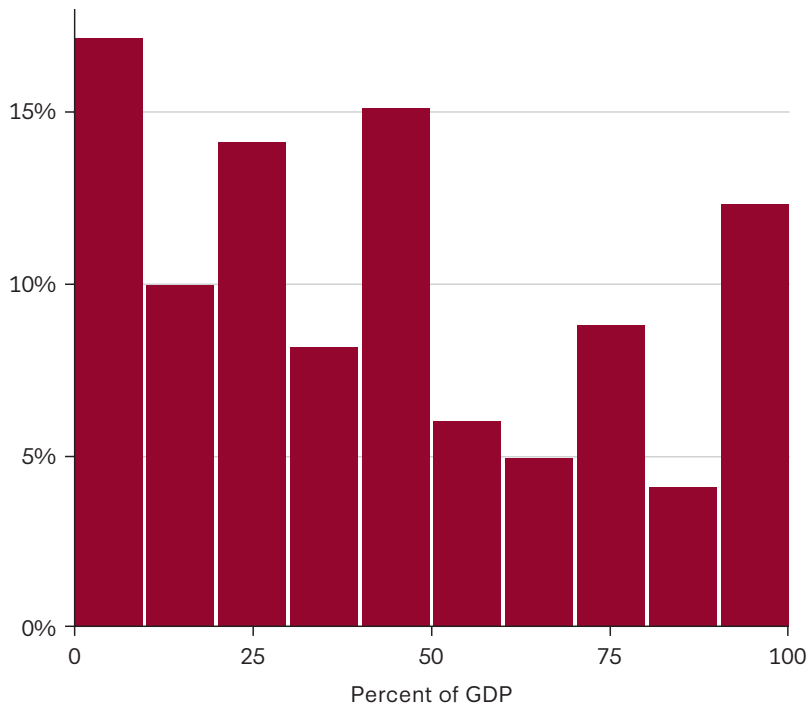
When faced with a harder question—what percentage of GDP is spent by the federal government—the proportion of correct answers plummets. Because many people have trouble making accurate quantitative estimates, we asked the people taking the survey to make their “best guess.” The correct answer for both 2020 and 2021, the two years preceding the survey, was approximately 30%, but in the sample, the most common answers were 25% (low relative to the previous two years, high relative to the pre-pandemic years) and 50% (well above even the peak of 43% during World War II).

**TABLE 1** FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FISCAL POLICY

Question	Correct	Incorrect	Not sure
Has the national debt increased as a percentage of GDP?	57%	19%	25%
Does the federal government spend more than it collects in taxes?	47%	23%	29%
What does the federal government spend as a percentage of GDP?	14%	79%	7%

**Note:** Percentage of respondents answering the question correctly, answering incorrectly, or stating they were not sure. The correct answer to the first two questions is “yes,” and the correct answer to question three is between 25% and 35% of GDP.

**FIGURE 1** Guesses of annual federal government spending as a percentage of GDP



As shown in figure 1, there was a spread of guesses across the full range: some were near zero, and others were at or close to 100%. Only 15% of the sample knew or guessed that federal spending had recently been running between 25% and 35% of GDP. Thus, large groups of the public either grossly underestimate or overestimate what the federal government spends. Even grading on a curve, the level of knowledge displayed seems very low, especially because this is critical information for understanding which tax rates or spending cuts would be required to balance the budget.

Republicans were more likely to answer each of the three budget questions correctly than Democrats: 61% of Republicans knew that the federal budget had a deficit compared to only 41% of Democrats, and 68% of Republicans knew that the national debt had increased relative to GDP versus only 51% of Democrats (table 2). Both of these differences are statistically significant. Conversely, a large majority, regardless of party, were not very close to the correct answer for federal spending as a percentage of GDP, and the difference between parties was not statistically significant.

For these items, independents scored between Democrats and Republicans in terms of accuracy. This finding is unexpected because independents tend to follow politics less closely than partisans. Do a majority of Democrats and independents, as well as a sizable minority of Republicans, really not know that there is a budget deficit? Or is there cognitive dissonance between a desire for higher spending, or lower taxes, and budgetary realities?

**TABLE 2** FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FISCAL POLICY, BY PARTY

Question	Democrat	Republican	Independent	p-Value
Has the national debt increased as a percentage of GDP?	51%	68%	54%	<.01
Does the federal government spend more than it collects in taxes?	41%	61%	44%	<.01
What does the federal government spend as a percentage of GDP?	12%	15%	15%	0.05

**Note:** Percentage of respondents answering the question correctly, answering incorrectly, or stating they were not sure. The correct answer to the first two questions is “yes,” and the correct answer to question three is between 25% and 35% of GDP.

**TABLE 3** PERCEPTIONS ABOUT RELATIVE SPENDING GROWTH IN PROGRAMS

Program	More quickly	Same as others	Less quickly	Not sure
Military/national security	37%	21%	18%	24%
Environmental subsidies	28%	19%	24%	29%
Medicaid	28%	23%	22%	28%
Medicare	25%	27%	23%	26%
Social Security	22%	23%	30%	25%
Education	20%	23%	32%	25%
Transportation	17%	26%	29%	29%

It is possible, of course, that people might be better at making relative instead of absolute judgments. We also asked them about the growth of spending in seven important program areas:

In the past 10 years, total government spending as well as spending on most programs has increased, but some programs have grown faster than others. For each of the following programs, do you think spending has grown more or less quickly than total government spending?

As before, about 25%–30% of respondents did not feel they knew enough to say whether each of these programs had above- or below-average growth in spending (table 3). Military/national security spending was most likely to be perceived as growing faster than other programs. In fact, military outlays were smaller as a percentage of GDP than they were ten years earlier. Federal education spending, which had grown rapidly over the past decade, was perceived to be growing *less* quickly than most other categories.

**TABLE 4** PERCEPTIONS ABOUT SPENDING GROWTH IN PROGRAMS, BY PARTY

Program	Democrat	Independent	Republican	p-Value
Military/national security	50%	36%	22%	<.01
Medicare	25%	23%	28%	0.14
Medicaid	23%	25%	38%	<.01
Social Security	22%	22%	22%	0.99
Transportation	16%	16%	19%	0.28
Environmental subsidies	15%	30%	43%	<.01
Education	13%	21%	28%	<.01

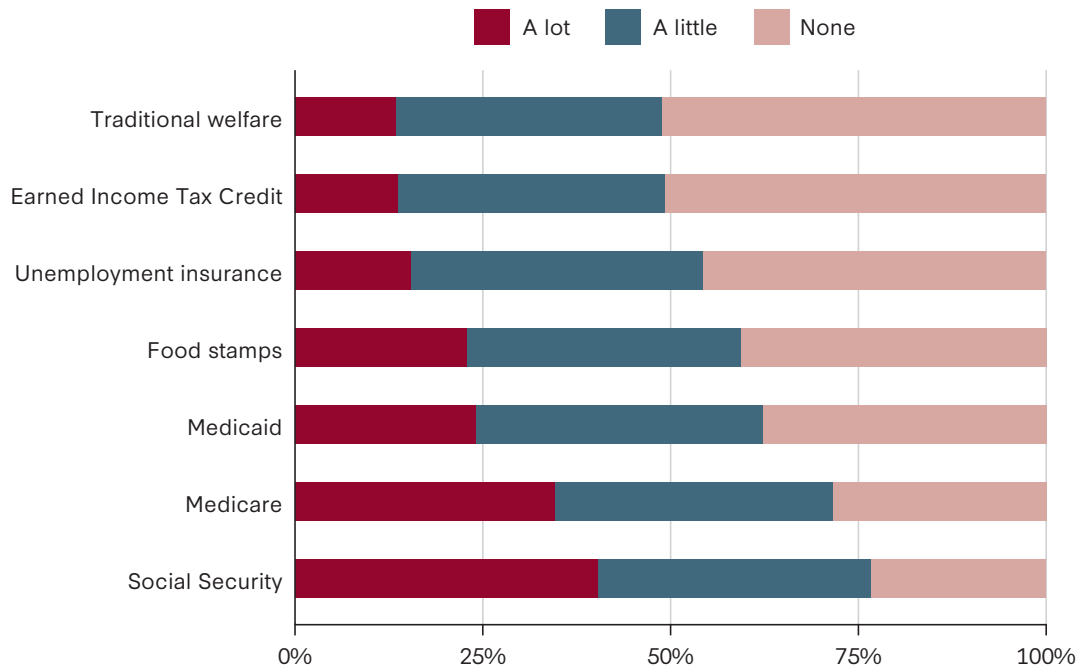
Here again, there are partisan differences in factual knowledge. Table 4 shows the percentage who think each program has grown “more quickly” than total spending, broken down by party identification. The pattern is clear: partisans perceived programs that they were predisposed to dislike to have grown more quickly, whereas those they liked were thought to have grown less quickly. For example, 50% of Democrats believe that military/national security spending has increased as a share of federal spending, while only 13% think that is true for education. In contrast, among Republicans, 43% think environmental subsidies have increased as a share of GDP (the survey was conducted a few months before the Inflation Reduction Act, which included substantial green energy subsidies, was passed and well before any such spending commenced), and 38% think that of Medicaid. Programs with bipartisan support, like Medicare and Social Security, are not perceived as growing quickly.

When asked about what proportion of the federal budget was spent on each of these program areas, most respondents grossly overestimated the proportion of spending in *every* area. For example, 60% of respondents thought that defense spending constituted more than 20% of the federal budget, when the reality is that it amounted to about 11% of federal outlays.

## WHAT VOTERS THINK THEY KNOW

Most voters do not, however, think they know a lot about most federal programs. We asked respondents to provide a self-assessment of their level of knowledge on a three-point scale ranging from “none” to “a lot.” For most programs, only 10%–20% think they know “a lot” about how these programs operate (figure 2). For the two largest social insurance programs (Social Security and Medicare), more than one-quarter think they know “a lot,” but still a substantial majority claim to know “a little” or “none.” Of course, Social Security and Medicare have a very large number of current participants and an even larger number of future participants, so it is natural to think people would be more interested in these than in programs targeted at smaller groups. But even for the largest programs, only a minority of the electorate believe they are well informed.

**FIGURE 2** Self-assessed levels of policy knowledge, by program



## DO VOTERS DESIRE MORE INFORMATION?

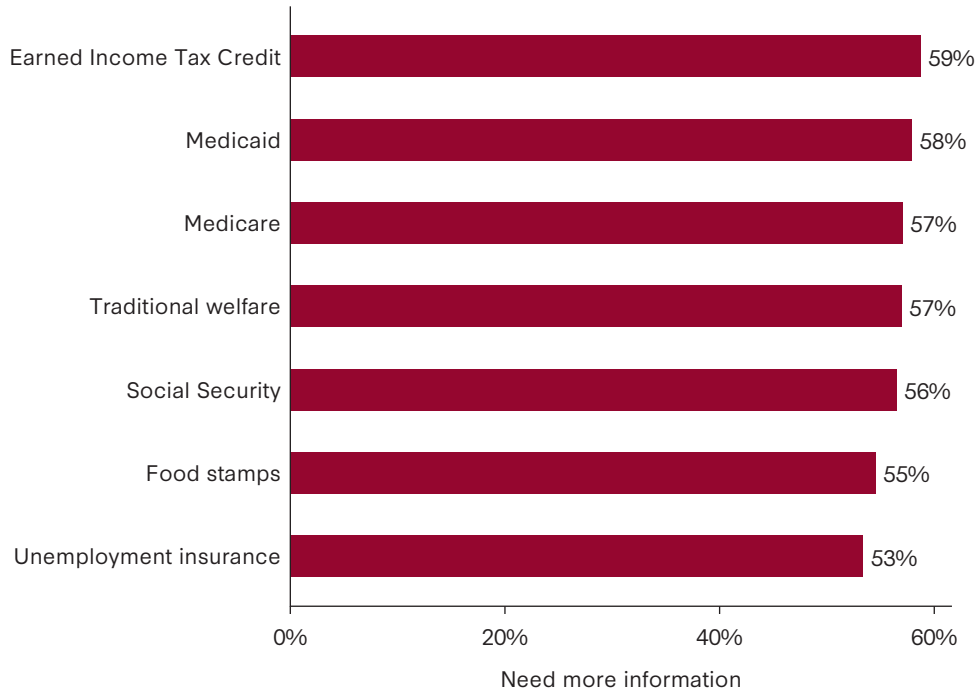
The picture so far is one of people with both low actual and self-perceived knowledge about the basic features of the federal budget. We wondered whether they think this is a problem or whether the topics were too remote and uninteresting. Do they think that they know enough to function well as citizens or that they would benefit significantly from knowing more about the policy choices facing the country? We therefore asked this question:

On which of these programs do you need MORE objective information to decide what the government should be doing versus those on which you already have ENOUGH objective information?

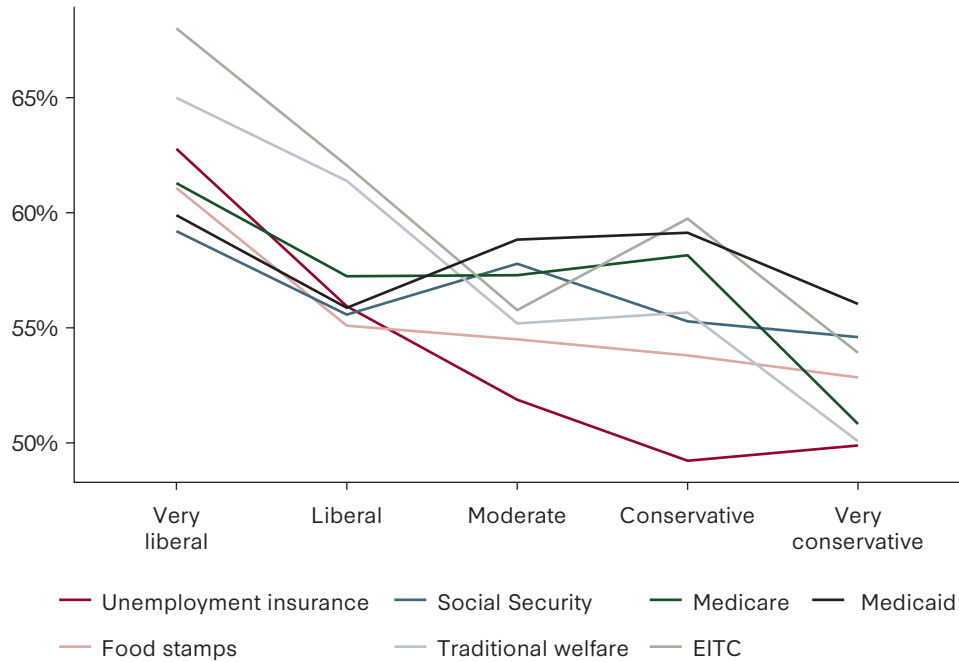
Figure 3 shows the percentage who think they need *more* objective information. A clear majority of respondents thought they needed more information about policy choices for every government program.

The need for more information is not uniformly felt throughout the electorate, however. On all the issues that we asked about, respondents at the liberal end of the ideological spectrum said that they needed more information than those at the conservative end (figure 4). The desire was particularly strong among those who described themselves as “very liberal”: between 7% and 15% of this group were more likely to desire more information.

**FIGURE 3** Percentage of respondents who think they need more information about policy choices, by program



**FIGURE 4** Percentage of respondents who think they need more information, by program and political ideology



## WHICH ISSUES VOTERS NEED MORE INFORMATION ABOUT

In another survey, we asked about issues before Congress:<sup>2</sup>

Here are some specific policy areas that the next Congress will be taking up. On which of these policies do you need MORE objective information to decide what the government should be doing versus those on which you already have ENOUGH objective information?

Table 5 shows that for only two topics (relating to taxes and to national security and the defense budget) did more than half of respondents think they needed more objective information. On many issues, especially on those where there are large partisan differences (such as climate change, immigration, and inequality), a majority think they already have enough objective information to make informed policy choices. However, even on these issues, a very large minority—two or more of every five interviewed—thought they needed more objective information, an interesting educational opportunity in an era of polarization.

The desire for more information does not exhibit as large and statistically significant partisan or ideological slant as seen previously on factual knowledge about deficits, debt and overall spending, and relative program growth. Table 6 reveals that a larger percentage of Democrats than Republicans are more interested in obtaining additional information only about inflation, inequality, and climate change, but on the remaining issues the partisan differences are small and not statistically significant.

Liberal-conservative differences in the desire for more information parallel party differences, with liberals/Democrats and conservatives/Republicans giving similar answers, as seen in table 7. Those who classify themselves as “moderate” or are not sure about their personal ideologies are usually more likely to desire additional information. It is members of this middle

**TABLE 5** POLICY AREAS AND NEED FOR INFORMATION

Issue	Need more	Have enough
Changes to the tax code	67%	33%
National security and the defense budget	52%	48%
Inflation and government spending	50%	50%
Reform of voting and elections	46%	54%
K-12 education	44%	56%
Inequality in incomes and wealth	44%	56%
Political polarization	42%	58%
Border security and immigration	41%	59%
Climate change	38%	62%



**TABLE 6** NEED FOR MORE INFORMATION IN POLICY AREAS, BY PARTY

Issue	Democrat	Republican	Independent	p-Value
Changes to the tax code	71%	67%	64%	0.11
Inflation and government spending	56%	43%	49%	0.01
National security and the defense budget	56%	54%	49%	0.16
Inequality in incomes and wealth	48%	36%	47%	<.01
Reform of voting and elections	45%	43%	47%	0.59
K-12 education	44%	38%	46%	0.13
Border security and immigration	42%	41%	40%	0.85
Political polarization	41%	44%	43%	0.79
Climate change	40%	32%	41%	0.04

**TABLE 7** NEED FOR MORE INFORMATION IN POLICY AREAS, BY POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Issue	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Not sure	p-Value
Changes to the tax code	70%	67%	63%	71%	0.28
National security and the defense budget	47%	50%	51%	70%	<.01
Inflation and government spending	46%	57%	42%	57%	<.01
K-12 education	42%	48%	37%	52%	0.02
Inequality in incomes and wealth	40%	50%	34%	66%	<.01
Reform of voting and elections	39%	49%	44%	53%	0.05
Border security and immigration	38%	42%	37%	54%	0.01
Political polarization	35%	45%	39%	57%	<.01
Climate change	32%	46%	28%	60%	<.01

group who often score lowest on measures of policy knowledge and say they would like to have more objective information. Of course, these individuals are often precisely the swing voters deciding elections.

## WHAT VOTERS THINK OTHER PEOPLE NEED TO LEARN ABOUT

As shown earlier, the proportion of voters saying they were unsure about the answers to factual questions varies only a little across topic or program. There is, in contrast, quite a

**TABLE 8** ASSESSMENT OF WHAT OTHERS KNOW

Policy	Well informed	Poorly informed	Misinformed	Not sure
Social Security	25%	39%	18%	18%
Medicare	22%	42%	17%	19%
Food stamps (SNAP)	18%	42%	21%	19%
Medicaid	16%	45%	19%	20%
Unemployment insurance	15%	43%	19%	22%
Earned Income Tax Credit	12%	47%	15%	25%
Traditional welfare	12%	43%	23%	23%

bit of variation in what voters think *other* people know about federal spending. We asked this question:

Voters differ in what they know about different government programs. Some people know a lot, others know a little, and sometimes they are misinformed and believe things that aren't true. For each of the following programs, would you say most voters are well informed, poorly informed, or misinformed?

The results are shown in table 8. Respondents thought that higher proportions were well informed about Social Security and Medicare, but only a few were well informed about the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) or "traditional welfare." Yet, respondents believed that no more than one-quarter of their fellow Americans were well informed about *any* of these government programs.

The proportions thought to be "well informed" closely parallel the proportions who thought themselves to know "a lot." The proportions saying the public is mostly "misinformed" are similar across the programs, though modestly higher for traditional welfare and SNAP (food stamps).

## NEXT STEPS

These findings just scratch the surface of how the public's understanding of critical policy areas could be enhanced to help create a more informed citizenry and electorate. The goal of this project is to continue to identify areas where objective policy information is needed and likely to be useful in informing the public's decision making and to support dissemination of objective information on policy approaches to dealing with these issues. It is a positive sign that many citizens seem to understand that they are operating with very limited information and indicate a desire to know more than they currently do. We are currently developing additional YouGov polling both to update and elaborate on these issues and to support the Tennenbaum

Program’s work on providing a rolling series of objective facts on important policy issues we have identified for which the public is likely to be receptive to objective information.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1. The initial survey was conducted in April 2022. We delayed publication of this work so it could lead the rollout of the Tennenbaum Program for Fact-Based Policy papers on prime areas where there seem to be the most demand for more reliable factual information and analyses, including differing policy implications.
2. Also conducted April 2022.
3. Stantcheva 2021 also concludes that a sizable percentage of the participants in her experiment desire more objective, accurate information in the particular case of income and estate taxation she studies. This is reflected by the 40% who are willing to give up a small amount of the potential modest payoff from a lottery if they win.

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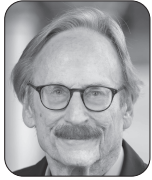
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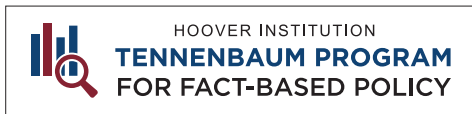
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### ***About the Tennenbaum Program for Fact-Based Policy***

The Tennenbaum Program for Fact-Based Policy is a Hoover Institution initiative that collects and analyzes facts and provides easy-to-digest nontechnical essays and derivative products, such as short videos, to disseminate reliable information on the nation's highly debated policy issues. Made possible through the generosity of Suzanne (Stanford '75) and Michael E. Tennenbaum and organized by Wohlford Family Senior Fellow and Stanford Tully M. Friedman Professor of Economics Michael J. Boskin, the program convenes experts representing a diverse set of policy perspectives, writing in tandem, to better inform not just policymakers and other stakeholders but also, most importantly, the general public.

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